

# Mock Stranding



VIRGINIA  
**AQUARIUM**  
& MARINE SCIENCE CENTER

*Students will simulate the response to a stranded sea turtle and collect important data.*

## Duration

Activity: 30 – 45 minutes

## Supplies

- Sea turtle model or plushie
- Stranding Data Collection tool (included)
- Pencils or writing tool
- Tape measurer
- Plastic bag, rope or fishing line

## Background

The mission of the Virginia Aquarium Stranding Response Program (VAQS) is to promote the conservation of marine animal species through response, research, rehabilitation and education. The VAQS is largely a volunteer-based group (the Stranding Team) operating from a Stranding Center located in Virginia Beach. Stranding Team personnel are permitted by state and federal authorities to respond to marine mammal and sea turtle strandings. The Stranding Response Program is supported by the donations of money, goods and services from the community and grant-making organizations.

Marine mammals and sea turtles spend their lives in the ocean, allowing us only brief glimpses into their intriguing world. Unfortunately, these amazing creatures sometimes end up on our beaches, sick, injured or dead. These events are known as "strandings." They can be due to natural causes, or possibly, human interactions. Stranding events provide a unique opportunity for scientists to examine animals that are otherwise difficult to study in their natural habitats.

Our marine animal Stranding Response Program is part of the Aquarium's Research & Conservation Division. The program is led by a group of trained staff and volunteers who responds to stranded marine mammals and sea turtles along the Virginia coastline and beyond. They rescue and rehabilitate live animals, collect data from dead specimens and support research on stranded marine animals found in Virginia. Most important, through their passion and commitment they serve as environmental ambassadors, educating the public about these magnificent animals and their conservation needs.

Since the program's inception more than 20 years ago, our Stranding Team has responded to more than 1500 marine mammals and over 2200 sea turtles. Averaging more than 200 per year, stranded animals have included harbor and harp seals, harbor porpoises, bottlenose dolphins, humpback whales, and loggerhead and Kemp's ridley sea turtles.

## Instructions

1. Ask the students to describe what a “stranding” is. Use resources such as the story of Tiki Jr. and Kermit, sea turtle rescued and rehabilitated by the Virginia Aquarium Stranding Response Team. Remind them that stranding can be due to illness or injury, often caused by human interaction.
2. Give each student or group of students a stranding data collection sheet, or project it on the board to fill out together. Fill in students’ names, school address and info then create a mock stranding location (ex: school’s baseball field) and ask the students to be as descriptive as possible, so another “response team” could find the animal with their directions. Include GPS coordinates if you know them.
3. For the Stranding Date, put today’s date. Ask students how many turtles they have responded to today (zero).
4. Ask students to determine the species of the sea turtle. If you are using a model that is not anatomically accurate, ask students to record unknown.
5. Ask the students if they see any flipper tags or satellite tags on the turtle. If nothing is visually attached, they would record no. You can mock these on your turtles if you’d like. In order to determine if a PIT tag is present, they would need a scanner.
6. For the condition of the turtle, ask the students to pretend that this is a real stranded turtle. Is it breathing? *No*. Does it stink? *No*. Do we see just bones, or can we recognize it as a fresh turtle? *This would be a fresh dead turtle*. You can also predetermine the condition of the turtles for the students or allow them to decide based on their ideas.
7. Ask the students to use the measuring tape to find the curved length and width. Length would be from the top of the carapace (not head) to the bottom of the carapace (not tail). The width would be along the widest portion of the shell. Ask the students what units to use (metric, since they are scientists).
8. For the sex of the turtle, tell them that juvenile turtles, like most juvenile reptiles, cannot be “sexed” externally. This turtle is not fully grown so it is “undetermined”. For adults, turtle sex can be determined three ways:
  - a. Males have longer claws (protection)
  - b. Males have longer tails (where genitalia is)
  - c. Males have more concave plastrons than females (so males can mount during mating)
9. If you would like, a plastic bag or fishing line wrapped around a flipper or the neck would be good for showing wounds/abnormalities. If possible, you can add marks to the model to indicate cuts or gashes made from various interactions with fishing gear or boats.

10. For final disposition, ask students what they should do with this dead turtle. Remind them that it is freshly dead or whatever they've determined for their turtle.
- a. Left on the beach – Usually only if so large or remotely located that getting a vehicle to the turtle is difficult. Painting the turtle would let anyone who sees it know that it has already been reported and left there on purpose. This is for a dead turtle only.
  - b. Buried – Usually only if so decomposed and remotely located that getting turtle would be difficult. Painting the turtle would let anyone who sees it know that it has been left there on purpose.
  - c. Salvaged – Parts can be used for research and education (like shells taken to classrooms).
  - d. Pulled up on beach/dune – Turtle was in the water and moved on land. Painting the turtle would let anyone who sees it know that it has already been reported and left there on purpose.
  - e. Alive released – Turtle was healthy, but maybe entangled, disoriented or tired. Once helped and given a clean bill of health, it was returned to the water.
  - f. Alive, taken to rehab – Like Kermit and Tiki Jr., the turtle needs further care before being released.
  - g. Left floating, not recovered – Usually only if so large or remotely located that getting a large enough boat with equipment to lift it is difficult. Painting the turtle would let anyone who sees it know that it has already been reported and left there on purpose.

# SEA TURTLE STRANDING AND SALVAGE NETWORK - STRANDING REPORT

**OBSERVER'S NAME / ADDRESS / PHONE:**  
 First \_\_\_\_\_ M.I. \_\_\_\_ Last \_\_\_\_\_  
 Facility \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Area code / Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

**STRANDING DATE:**  
 Year 20\_\_\_\_ Month \_\_\_\_ Day \_\_\_\_  
 Turtle number by day \_\_\_\_

**STRANDING LOCATION:**  
 State \_\_\_\_\_ City / County \_\_\_\_\_  
 Descriptive location (be specific) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Latitude \_\_\_\_\_ Longitude \_\_\_\_\_

**SPECIES: (check one)**  
 \_\_\_ CC = Loggerhead  
 \_\_\_ CM = Green  
 \_\_\_ DC = Leatherback  
 \_\_\_ EI = Hawksbill  
 \_\_\_ LK = Kemp's Ridley  
 \_\_\_ UN = Unidentified

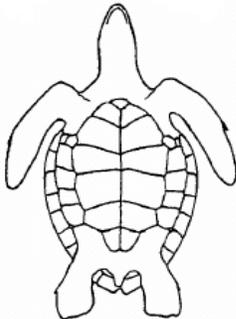
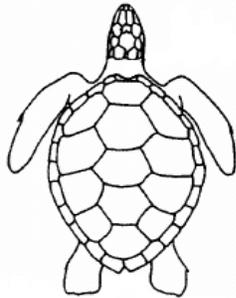
**CONDITION: (check one)**  
 \_\_\_ 0 = Alive  
 \_\_\_ 1 = Fresh dead  
 \_\_\_ 2 = Moderately decomposed  
 \_\_\_ 3 = Severely decomposed  
 \_\_\_ 4 = Dried carcass  
 \_\_\_ 5 = Skeleton, bones only

**SEX:**  
 \_\_\_ Undetermined  
 \_\_\_ Female  
 \_\_\_ Male

**TAGS: Contact state coordinator before disposing of any tagged animal!**  
 Flipper tags? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No  
 Check all 4 flippers. If found, record tag # / location / return address  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Satellite tags? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No

**MEASUREMENTS:**  
 Curved length: \_\_\_\_\_ cm  
 Curved width: \_\_\_\_\_ cm

Mark wounds / abnormalities on diagrams at left and describe below. Please note if no wounds / abnormalities exist. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_



**FINAL DISPOSITION: (check one)**  
 \_\_\_ 1 = Left on beach where found; painted? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No (5)  
 \_\_\_ 2 = Buried: \_\_\_ on beach / \_\_\_ off beach; painted? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No  
 \_\_\_ 3 = Salvaged: \_\_\_ all / \_\_\_ part(s); what/why? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_ 4 = Pulled up on beach/dune; painted? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No  
 \_\_\_ 6 = Alive, released  
 \_\_\_ 7 = Alive, taken to rehab. Facility, where? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_ 8 = Left floating, not recovered; painted? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No  
 \_\_\_ 9 = Disposition unknown, explain \_\_\_\_\_